

VZCZCXRO4801
PP RUEHDBU
DE RUEHMO #2327/01 0691152
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 101152Z MAR 06
FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1994
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHDX/MOSCOW POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 002327

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/10/2016

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [RS](#)

SUBJECT: NORTH CAUCASUS MUSLIMS: INDEPENDENT VOICE?

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Kirk Augustine. Reason 1.4
(b, d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The election of Magomed-Khadzhi Albogachiyev as leader of the Coordinating Center of Muslims of the North Caucasus marks a clear step to distance the Moscow-based Center -- and by extension the Muslim clerics in the region, whom it purports to represent -- from the clan-based leaders of the North Caucasus autonomous republics. Albogachiyev founded the organization, but resigned as Mufti of Ingushetia in 2004 after a public row with the Republic's President. One obstacle he faces in regaining influence is the split of North Caucasus Muslims into two religious wings based on geography. If he negotiates that obstacle, he still has to steer carefully between the Kremlin and the clan-based leaders of the autonomous republics. End Summary.

Background

¶2. (U) The Coordinating Center of Muslims of the North Caucasus was founded in 1998 to enhance coordination among the official Muftis leading the Muslim Spiritual Directorates of each of the seven autonomous republics of the North Caucasus. Its founder and first chair was Magomed-Khadzhi (Muhammad-Haji) Albogachiyev, then Mufti of Ingushetia. Albogachiyev led the Center until 2003; in 2004 he left his post as Mufti of Ingushetia after public disagreements with the Republic's new president, ex-KGB officer Murat Zyazikov. The chair of the Coordinating Center then rotated among the serving muftis of the North Caucasus, and Albogachiyev became Deputy Chair. On February 14, 2006, however, the Coordinating Center amended the rule that demanded its Chair be a serving mufti, and chose Albogachiyev to lead the Center once again. Albogachiyev has been visible since he took office, and attended a well-publicized meeting of Muslim leaders with FM Sergey Lavrov on February 26. The new position makes Albogachiyev one of the three top Muslim leaders of Russia. The other two are Ravil Gaynutdin, leader of the Russian Council of Muftis (for the European part of Russia), and Talgat Tadzhuddin of the Central Muslim Spiritual Directorate based in Ufa.

Back in the Saddle Again

¶3. (C) In a March 7 conversation, Albogachiyev made clear to us his satisfaction with being head of one of the three "centers" of Muslim life in Russia. He supported in principle the idea of uniting these three centers under a Mufti of Russia, but noted that such a hierarchical structure is rare in Islamic countries. Personal rivalries may be another obstacle; Albogachiyev noted that "we have some disagreements with the Tatars" (i.e., with the Russian Council of Muftis and its well-known leader, Gaynutdin).

¶4. (C) Albogachiyev stressed the need to improve Muslim education in the North Caucasus (the day after his selection,

he announced a decision to ask for GOR assistance in setting up an advanced institute for Muslim clerical training in Nalchik, Kabardino-Balkaria). He told us he wanted more facilities to train clerics in the region, rather than sending students abroad. He noted that there are 17 institutes of Islamic learning in Dagestan, but far fewer in the other autonomous republics. Asked about the spread of radical Islam in the North Caucasus, Albogachiyev admitted that corruption and social neglect were contributing factors, but stressed education as the solution. He noted that the individual jamaats espousing radical Islam were unlikely to unite or achieve the kind of electoral success that Hamas recently enjoyed in the Palestinian Authority.

Divided by Mountains: The Ecstatics, the Pious

15. (C) While Albogachiyev's strong and influential voice may give a single public face to the Coordinating Center, the religious map of the North Caucasus does not favor unity. The Muslims are split down the middle geographically. From Ossetia west, areas that traditionally looked towards the Ottoman Empire, the predominant madhhab, or school of jurisprudence, is Hanafi, which prevails in Turkey today. In contrast, the Muslims of Ingushetia, Chechnya and Dagestan follow the Shafi'i madhhab. More importantly, 90 percent (according to Albogachiyev and others we have spoken to) are at least nominal members of a Sufi order -- either the Naqshibandis or the Qadiris, both widespread in Central Asia and Iraq (the Naqshibandis are important in Turkey as well). (Note: In Chechnya during the wars since 1994, Naqshibandis tended to support the Federal side, while Qadiris tended to support the insurgents; Chechen separatist leader Shamil Basayev comes from a Qadiri family.) Albogachiyev himself

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is a member of the Kunta-Haji "vird" of the Qadiris, founded and led by the charismatic Chechen missionary Kunta-Haji Kishiyev until his arrest and exile by the Russians in 1864. Although the historical Kunta-Haji died two years later, his followers have told us (and Albogachiyev affirmed that he believes) that Kunta-Haji lives on in occultation, like the Sunni Mahdi or the Shi'a Twelfth Imam.

16. (C) In contrast, Albogachiyev's deputy Shafig Auesovich Pshikhachev told us separately, the Muslims of Kabardia (where he served as mufti for 14 years) are "pragmatic." They are also quietist. Pshikhachev said his clan has been a "bearer" of the Islamic religion since it came to Kabardia in the seventeenth century. Of the nine recognized Islamic scholars and other religious officials such as Pshikhachev himself (and Pshikhachev's first cousin, current Mufti of Kabardino-Balkaria) that the clan has produced in those four centuries, all have been on good terms with the authorities of the day. He seemed proud that when a whole generation of "muhajirs" fled the North Caucasus for the Ottoman Empire following the Russian conquest of 1859, only three families of the Pshikhachev clan left. Albogachiyev will have some politicking to do to unite the two very different halves of his new domain -- which perhaps explains why he asked for his first project in the capital of Kabardino-Balkaria.

Comment

17. (C) Under Albogachiyev, the Coordinating Center is now in the peculiar position of being -- at least potentially -- at odds with the very muftis whose activities it purportedly exists to coordinate. The Kremlin may, in fact, find this useful. Moscow, despite avowed support for the "vertical of power," has been ceding more de facto autonomy to local clans to govern as they will -- as long as they keep their fiefdoms quiet and loyal. A separate center of Islamic influence based in Moscow, independent of the North Caucasus clans, is in line with the tried and true traditions of Russian statecraft, but the minefield between the Kremlin and the

clans will not be easy for Albogachiyev to navigate.
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